

As Time Goes By

(drafted by Stewart Coffin in 2004 and revised in 2008)

When I came to M.I.T. in 1953, construction had just begun on Kresge Auditorium. Shortly after its completion, Jane and I went to hear Eleanor Roosevelt speak there. Jane took much more interest in world affairs than I, but I tagged along anyway, probably more to see the new auditorium. I have very little recollection of that talk except that most of it had to do with international affairs and the United Nations, since Mrs. Roosevelt had been a U.S. delegate to the U.N. from 1946 to 1952 during the Truman administration. The one distinct recollection that I have retained to this day occurred during the question and answer period after her speech. Oddly enough, I cannot remember just what the question was but rather only her response, which was a defense of her position on Middle East policy and which I must have realized even then was controversial. I wish now that I had paid more attention. It has haunted me ever since.

Recently I have taken a renewed interest in Palestine, mostly from having become acquainted with Mary's P.E.O. International Peace Scholarship student Amal Jadou, who grew up in a Palestine refugee camp. Accordingly I have tried to learn more about the recent history of Palestine and Mrs. Roosevelt's involvement in it. I reported on some of my findings in 2004 in a six-page report, "Meeting Eleanor Roosevelt," that I circulated to friends. Since some of her faithful admirers were dismayed by the critical slant of that report, this revised version is limited mostly to quotes from published sources, many in her own hand, and you can draw your own conclusions.

Of the many books about her I found in the Andover library, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* by her biographer and dear friend Joseph P. Lash seems to be one of the more informative. In this report, numbers in brackets refer to pages in that popular book. In the end, though, I found the Internet a more useful research tool than library books. I have piles of pages printed out, which I have tried my best to condense into just a few.

At the end of World War II, there were thousands of refugees in Western Europe, many of them Jewish, living unhappily in refugee camps. The problem then became what to do with them. No country wanted them, at least not in such huge numbers. Many Jews wanted to go to Palestine to join the 600,000 already living there. After protracted controversy among the great powers, in 1947 the U.N. came up with a plan to partition most of the land of Palestine, not including Jerusalem, into two parts, one Jewish and the other Arab. Mrs. Roosevelt at first opposed this plan but later became its chief proponent [p122]. Opposition came from the British and of course the Arab countries. This lengthy U.N. Resolution 181, which can be found on the Internet and took me nearly an hour to digest, is riddled with vague provisions and contradictions. It includes a map showing the mostly desert land of Palestine arbitrarily dissected like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, with about half the land area designated "Jewish state," half "Arab state," and a small amount "Jerusalem international zone." Historian Arthur Goldschmidt called it a "crazy quilt pattern" almost impossible to enforce.

The plan then established regulations governing the separate states on the basis of religion and ethnicity, while at the same time it emphatically prohibited discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity (in accord with Article 1 of the United Nations Charter). What other time or place in history has an international boundary been arbitrarily drawn

on such hopelessly ill-conceived and self-contradictory terms? Furthermore, there were no means provided for carrying it out and enforcing it. To many observers, including career professionals in the U.S. State Department, it looked like a sure recipe for future trouble in a land already facing increasing armed conflict. But Mrs. Roosevelt fought hard for its passage in the U.N. [p123], which finally came to pass in late 1947 by a close vote of 33 to 13 in the General Assembly, since two-thirds was required for passage. All Arab countries were of course opposed.

This partition had the effect of forcibly evicting 750,000 Arabs from land that their people had occupied for centuries, with no provision as to where they might go, and confiscating their property and homes with no compensation whatsoever. Many fled to live in refugee tent camps in nearby Arab countries (see my related report, "Meeting Amal"). Not only they but Arabs in surrounding countries were bitterly opposed, and many vowed to fight back. When Mrs. Roosevelt, champion of human rights, was questioned about this woeful injustice, her response was: "It will not hurt the Arabs, in fact they will profit by it, but we do not always like what is good for us in this world" [p124].

Because of the ever increasing violence in Palestine as a result of Resolution 181, an embargo was placed on arms shipments to that region, agreed to by practically all countries including the U.S. Ironically, Mrs. Roosevelt voted for a resolution in the U.N. to "take further steps to ensure the demilitarization of Jerusalem," yet at the same time she was strongly opposed to the arms embargo and fought hard for more arms shipment to Israel [p127]. Quoting Lash: "She was outraged by the U.S. embargo on arms." In 1948, she wrote to President Truman: "The Arabs have to be handled with strength."

As a consequence of Resolution 181, in May of 1948, the Jews of Palestine formed a government and declared the formation of the State of Israel on land more or less already occupied by them. In December of that year, the U.N. passed the infamous Resolution 194, the most controversial provision of which was to provide for the eventual return of the 750,000 Arab refugees to their homes or just compensation for property taken from them. These long-suffering refugees and their families, which now number about 3,200,000 because of population increase, have been waiting sixty years for this U.N. resolution to be implemented. It remains to this day one of the major issues of contention and cause of unending suffering, armed conflict, and terrorism throughout the Middle East. Mrs. Roosevelt's biographers are strangely silent about her key role on the U.N. Human Rights Commission while this strife was taking place and her apparent lack of interest in bringing about a just resolution.

In seeking an explanation for Mrs. Roosevelt's controversial role in all this, I next searched through her personal correspondence. (There is a huge amount of information also to be found on the Internet pertaining to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but much of it is opinionated, and one is not always sure how accurate.) *A World of Love*, edited by Joseph P. Lash, contains 575 pages of her letters, both to and from, with annotation. Unfortunately, many of the letters have been edited, and Lash gives no explanation of the basis on which he did this. Her letters reveal her great concern for refugees the world over, including 1700 Jewish orphans in Cyprus in 1947, 7000 Jews in Morocco in 1956, and the Hungarian refugees in 1957. Yet in all of her papers, the only reference I have been able to uncover regarding the one million Palestinian refugees is the following caustic remark dated 1952: "It is the Arab govts who keep them stirred up to go home

with a little help from the Communists!”

Not only are Mrs. Roosevelt’s biographers almost completely silent regarding her position on the Palestinian refugee issue, but likewise historian Arthur Goldschmidt, who does not even mention the historic U.N. Resolution 194 and its tragic aftermath in his *Concise History of the Middle East*. I did, however, run across the following, written by Andrew I. Killgore, who was U.S. consul in Jerusalem in 1959 during her visit there:

“Eleanor Roosevelt was a heroine in the United States. She had long stood up for black Americans, for workers and for women. And she was indelibly identified with Jewish issues—political Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel. But if her support for the establishment of Israel had heightened her popularity in Israel and the U.S., it had exactly the opposite effect elsewhere in the Middle East. She was detested by the Palestinians, who had never heard her breathe a word about their considerable suffering, or even mention the word Palestinian (but see page 6). If she was even aware that the arrival of 750,000 Jewish immigrants in Palestine had turned 750,000 Palestinians into refugees, it could not be deduced from anything she had ever been quoted as saying. Her apparent lack of interest on that subject made her seem either soft-headed or senile—too old to change her mind even though the evidence was all around her. ... So Mrs. Roosevelt visited and departed from the very heart of the Arab-Israel dispute without absorbing even a glimmer of what it was all about.” Quoting Lash: “She was a woman of bewildering paradox.”

Several others made similar observations. Her friend Ralph Bunche, who became the new U.N. mediator in the conflict after his predecessor, Count Bernadotte of Sweden was assassinated by the Stern group of Israeli terrorists in 1948, is quoted as saying that “one of the difficulties in discussing the Palestine problem with Mrs. Roosevelt was her almost ‘primitive’ conception of the Arabs. She still saw them in terms that her husband had used when he described his encounter with Ibn Saud as desert-dwelling sheiks who pitched their tents on the decks of cruisers and were interested in neither irrigation nor trees” [137].

Durward Sandifer, Mrs. Roosevelt’s close friend and chief advisor in the U.N. is quoted as saying: “She impressed me as having an open mind on every subject other than Palestine. She was not open to persuasion on that issue.” Her numerous writings on the subject are permeated with praise for the Israelis and with disdain bordering on contempt for the Arabs. She did not visit the Middle East until 1952, and came away with an impression of Israeli dynamism and Arab passivity. “Israel is like a breath of fresh air after the Arab countries,” she wrote. According to Andrew Killgore, in 1959, on one of her many visits, she “alluded to the marvelous example of desert-blooming to which the PR-skilled Israelis had drawn her attention ...though we all knew that Palestine had been one of the most fertile lands in the Middle East, and the orange groves had been thriving long before the Israelis arrived.”

When I first became interested in this topic, my knowledge of Middle Eastern history was practically nil, but I have been trying my best to fill in the gaps, so much easier now with the Internet. Before World War II, Great Britain dominated the Middle East. Shortly after the start of the war, dwindling U.S. oil reserves became a major concern, and the Roosevelt administration began a bidding war with Britain to court the favor of Saudi Arabia with millions of Lend-Lease dollars on top of oil revenues, which the U.S. easily won (\$33 million vs. Britain’s \$3 million). Despite the ongoing war (in

which Saudi Arabia remained neutral), most of this money went to the Saudi royal family for luxurious palaces and other extravagances, and to other corrupt officials. They cleverly played this rivalry between the U.S. and Britain to get ever more money, which led to even more corruption in Saudi Arabia as well as increased tensions between Britain and the U.S. In the end, it was all about oil. Near the end of the war, F.D.R. met with Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia to discuss postwar plans, including the question of Jewish refugees being allowed to settle in Arab lands. F.D.R. promised to consult with the Arabs before taking any action on the Palestinian question, a promise that he made official in writing on April 5, 1945. A week later President Roosevelt died. A fascinating account of all this may be found in *The Kingdom* by Robert Lacey.

Still missing from all of this is an explanation for Mrs. Roosevelt's perplexing blind spot for the plight of the nearly one million Palestinian refugees. We do know that F.D.R. made no attempt to conceal his dislike for the Arabs, their corrupt royal families in particular, and especially the intractable Ibn Saud after their meeting in 1945. Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau wrote in his diary of a conversation with F.D.R. in which the President said: "I actually would put a barbed wire around Palestine, and I would begin to move the Arabs out of Palestine...Each time we move out an Arab we would bring in another Jewish family...There are lots of places to which you could move the Arabs... All you have to do is drill a well..." We also know that Mrs. Roosevelt was deeply affected by the suffering of the Jews in the Holocaust and later in the refugee camps in Europe. This developed into a lifelong passionate affinity for the Jews and their cause, and especially their resettlement in Palestine. Many of her close friends were ardent Zionists, and her attachment to David Gurewitsch must have added further complications. Perhaps all of this, combined with the peculiar circumstances of her own personal life, somehow caused her to be oblivious to the plight of the Palestinians, even to an extent that might be described as pathological. Added to that, when Mrs. Roosevelt was appointed by President Truman to serve as U.N. delegate, she had virtually no knowledge or experience in international affairs, a fact that she readily admitted. For that reason she was given what was considered a minor appointment on the Human Rights Commission.

Finally, one has to wonder what all this has had on subsequent history, and all of the horrors that continue up to the present day, not only in the Middle East but now spreading worldwide. Who can say? That part of the world, squeezed in between Europe, Asia, and Africa, has been a chronic trouble spot and battleground for centuries. After World War II, the vast oil reserves of the region added a new complication. The great powers, U.S., U.K., and U.S.S.R. often acted in their own self-interests. And then there was the ongoing deadly serious cold war with the Soviet Block and fear of communism, which the records indicate influenced practically every action taken in the U.N. at that time. In the U.S., partisan election politics often influenced foreign policy (as always!).

This report, first drafted in 2004, has by now (2008) undergone many revisions, partly for reasons already explained and also as more information become available. In particular, we now have access on the Internet to Eleanor Roosevelt's syndicated daily column "My Day"—over 6000 pages in her own hand. They span 18 years from 1945 to 1962. One may search key words. Many of them read like a personal diary—what she did, where she went, visiting friends, attending concerts, and the like. One cannot help but be amazed by her unending whirlwind travels, not only throughout the U.S. but all

over the world, to meet and speak on behalf of worthy causes such as world peace, racial tolerance, women's rights, education, and the like. One gains the impression of a tireless ambassador of charity and goodwill. Alas, in contrast to these are her frequent tirades against Arabs in general and their leaders in particular, blaming them, in cahoots with "the Communists," for most of the problems in the Middle East. Her notion was that by supplying arms to be used against the Arabs, we were in effect carrying on our fight against the USSR and "the Communists." President Truman, to his credit, turned down her demands for supplying military armament to Israel, which our European allies also opposed, but not so President Eisenhower, who agreed to supply some arms in 1956. When it soon became obvious that these arms shipments were just adding more fuel to the fires in the Middle East, common sense prevailed and they were stopped, for a while at least.

What still remains to be explained is her apparent disregard for the decades of suffering by the several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees. (And one might also wonder why all of this goes mostly unmentioned by her biographers.) In her paper, "Eleanor Roosevelt, Liberalism, and Israel," author Michelle Mart, Professor of History at Penn State, does shed at least some light on this question. She describes in some detail Eleanor's romantic affair with fervent Zionist David Gurewitsch, which lasted for fifteen years, with only some of the more intimate details left open to speculation. It may well have been the only true love affair of her otherwise difficult personal life with her unfaithful husband F.D.R. and overbearing mother-in-law Sara.

Eleanor met the soon to be divorced David Gurewitsch in 1944 and a year later asked him to be her personal physician. Already close friends, during a trip to Europe that they took together in 1947, their love affair is said to have heated up during a layover in Ireland. Until her death in 1962, they would remain close and travel together to thirteen countries the world over. (Some biographers describe this affair as being mostly her attachment to him rather than reciprocal.)

So much for the circumstances. Now for some speculation on my part. Consider the timing. All this started two years after her unfaithful husband died in the company of his attractive secretary and long time girlfriend Lucy Mercer. Shortly afterward, Eleanor launched herself into an energetic new life. She even tried to have her unsightly protruding front teeth corrected following an auto accident. In her extensive travels worldwide, she involved herself more than ever in human rights crusades.

Then along comes the young and handsome David Gurewitsch, eighteen years her junior. Being united in what she perhaps fantasized as a gallant fight for freedom would likely have stoked the flames even more. It reads almost like a scene right out of that classic wartime film *Casablanca*. From the thousands of pages in Mrs. Roosevelt's own hand now available, it is clear that the beginning of her woefully one-sided position on Israel and Palestine coincided with the beginning of her romantic affair with the ardent Zionist and pro-Israeli crusader David Gurewitsch.

*It's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die...
As time goes by**

From then on and for the rest of her life, in addition to all of her many other charitable interests and activities, Eleanor Roosevelt became a zealous traveling spokesperson, lecturer, and author in the cause of Zionism and on behalf of the still struggling State of Israel.

The expression *cherchez la femme*, which now has a broader meaning, was originally used in spy stories to indicate where to seek a cause when things go bad. Here I suspect it was more likely a case of *cherchez l'homme*.

*Hearts full of passion
Jealousy and hate
Woman needs man
And man must have his mate
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by**

Obviously, much of this report paints a rather negative picture of Eleanor Roosevelt. I will admit that when I began compiling it, I had much sympathy for the Palestinian refugees, which probably biased my research. On the Internet, you can find things to support almost any position if you search long enough. I will now try to correct some of those impressions by ending on a more positive note, based on studying many more hundreds of pages of her writings.

To be fair, it should be noted that when Mrs. Roosevelt was urging more arms for Israel, Great Britain was still supplying arms to the Arabs. Later, she too urged stopping all such shipments.

Regarding Killgore's observation that Mrs. Roosevelt never once spoke the word "Palestinian," that is probably correct, but not for the reason suggested. Back then it probably would have been ambiguous, meaning both Arabs and Jews. She referred to the refugees of Palestine a great many times, often sympathetically. She did even urge food shipments to relieve their suffering (although unfortunately little else).

One the whole, I came out with more positive feeling about her than I had at the start. So we will leave it at that and hope for eventual resolution of all the many problems facing the Middle East, now including even more of our own making.

*Taken from *As Time Goes By*, words and music by Herman Hupfeld, as played and sung by Dooley Wilson in *Casablanca*.